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EDITOR'S NOTE..... 5

ARTICLES

Aspects of Baptismal Symbolism in the New Testament.....7
Jeffrey Peterson

Finding Words to Nourish:
“Milk” and “Solid Food” in Earliest Christianity and
Today 17
Daniel Austin Napier

Baptism and the Moral Life 33
Allan J. McNicol

Turning Point:
Baptism as Rite of Passage 47
M. Todd Hall

Concerning Rebaptism 59
Keith D. Stanglin

I Am Baptized:
A Sermon 73
Stanley G. Reid

OBITER DICTA..... 81

CONTRIBUTORS..... 87

From the early days of the Restoration Movement, Churches of Christ and Christian Churches distinguished themselves from their near neighbors on the American frontier with a noticeably robust ecclesiology, reflected in, among other things, the theology and practice of baptism. Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott's "high" view of baptism stood out in the context of the Second Great Awakening, wherein salvation often came to be connected to a subjective experience of the Holy Spirit that was externally manifest in ways other than baptism. For evangelists like Charles Finney, someone could respond by approaching the "anxious seat." All of this took place apart from water baptism. Campbell's association of believers' baptism with salvation was denigrated by most evangelicals as "baptismal regeneration" and seen as a regression to salvation by works. In the eyes of many evangelicals today, baptism "for the remission of sins" is still regarded as a false teaching that undermines justification by grace through faith.

Yet not everyone is scandalized by the high view of baptism. Many evangelicals, in fact, are warming up to the teaching, and, in many circles, evangelicals are beginning to say the same thing that Churches of Christ have said all along. This shift is due, in part, to a fresh reading of the New Testament. The efficacy of baptism—or, better, the efficacy of God's work in baptism—is perhaps the clearest ecclesiological doctrine in the New Testament. In addition to the New Testament evidence, there is renewed evangelical interest in patristic resources, and the early church provides unanimous testimony of the indispensability of baptism, summed up in the Nicene Symbol's acknowledgment of "one baptism for remission of sins." The emerging ecumenical consensus, moreover, has favored a similarly high view of baptism, reflected in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order report of the World Council of Churches (for quotations, see "Obiter Dicta" in this issue).

During this year of centennial celebration of Austin Graduate School of Theology (founded in 1917), as we are encouraged to look back and look ahead, it is appropriate to examine a topic that has been—and continues to remain—pivotal to the identity and unity of the Restoration Movement. For, despite all the diversity of faith and practice that now characterizes Churches of Christ, the important place of baptism is one of the few identity markers

that most congregations have maintained. For all the attention that has been devoted to the understanding of baptism, there is always more to learn as we seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

To these ends, we have devoted this issue of *Christian Studies* to the topic of baptism, asking contributors to answer questions such as: What is the sacrament of baptism? How should we think about baptism? How should we practice baptism? How can our theology and practice of baptism be improved? Much of the focus will be not only on what baptism means as a punctiliar moment in time, but also on its meaning as a linear event. Although our churches have been united around passages such as Acts 2:38, there has traditionally been less reflection or consensus regarding what should lead up to baptism and what should follow it. We pray that the reflections on baptism found in these pages will be beneficial to the readers and to the church and will bring glory to God.

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Aspects of Baptismal Symbolism in the New Testament

Jeffrey Peterson

The importance of baptism in the life of the Christian church and the lives of its members does not consist only in its being the fulfillment of biblical command or the imitation of apostolic example. While the virtue of obedience should not be neglected in an age that celebrates individualism and even rebellion against inherited norms, the value of baptism in the life of faith is more deeply appreciated when it is recognized as an act rich in symbolic significance. Rather than mere compliance with a requirement, the baptism of believers is a parable enacted within the Christian community, expressing the founding faith of the church that God's saving purposes prefigured in the Old Testament have now been brought to fruition in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that the lives of believers have been "submerged" in that larger story. This brief survey of baptismal symbolism in the New Testament is offered in the hope that it will encourage further exploration of this perspective on baptism.¹

The most basic symbolism associated with baptism in the New Testament derives from the form of the rite itself, an immersion in water that suggests a bath or cleansing of the person immersed.² The association of the act

¹ The indispensable reference for the ancient Christian practice and understanding of baptism is Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); on the NT specifically, see 83–198. Among works focusing on the New Testament, I have found especially helpful Lars Hartman, *"Into the Name of the Lord Jesus": Baptism in the Early Church*, Studies of the New Testament and its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

² On the meaning of *baptizō* and related Greek words, see in addition to the lexica Ferguson's extensive discussion in *Baptism*, 38–59.

of baptism with cleansing is evident in the Gospel passages that discuss Jewish customs of washing before meals (Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38), in which the Greek word *baptizō* is often translated “wash” (cf. NRSV, NIV, ESV, REB). This symbolism of purification is sometimes explicit in reference to the baptismal rite, as when Ananias urges Paul, “Arise and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).³ Likewise, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were “washed ... in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, baptism is alluded to as a “washing” (*loutron*, Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5).⁴ We may also recognize an allusion to baptism in the invitation to the audience of the letter to the Hebrews to “approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22 NRSV).⁵

That baptism as suggesting purification is not more frequently referred to in the NT can perhaps be accounted for by the obviousness of this symbolism; a participant in or observer of the rite could scarcely fail to notice the purificatory aspect of a full ritual bath in water. The one explicit mention of baptism in 1 Peter highlights this symbolism but is difficult to construe precisely (1 Pet 3:21): Is Christian baptism presented as “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (NRSV), or “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (KJV), or “the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (CSB)? Does the “putting off of the filth of the flesh” refer to the “removal of dirt from the body” in general (ESV) or circumcision in particular (cf. Gen 17:11; Lev 19:23 KJV, NJB, and notes to NRSV, NASB, REB)?⁶ If the latter, then 1 Peter closely parallels the characterization of baptism in Colossians as the

³ Except as otherwise indicated, translations of Scripture are the author’s, usually with consultation of at least the NRSV.

⁴ On the baptismal associations in these passages, see Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 543; and the rich if at times speculative comments of Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary and an Introduction to Titus, I and II Timothy, The Pastoral Epistles*, Anchor Bible 45 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [1974]), 210–26.

⁵ See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 289.

⁶ See the excellent discussion by Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 266–72.

spiritual “circumcision of the Messiah,” the “stripping off of the body of flesh” initially experienced by Christ in his death and resurrection, in which Christians participate by dying and rising with him in baptism (Col 2:11–13).⁷ In any case, it is clear that the purification involved in Christian baptism is not from physical impurity, but rather has its effect in the spiritual realm.

Rites of purification were ubiquitous in ancient religious practice, Jewish as well as Greco-Roman, and any participant in a rite that involved an immersion bath in the context of interaction with a divine being would readily have understood purification to be involved. The Law of Moses laid down the basic norms for the Jewish rites practiced in the first century, the overarching aim being to respect the holiness of the divine presence honored in the temple and to avoid bringing impurity into proximity to it.⁸ The common interpretation generalized the obligation of one exposed to some sources of impurity to “bathe his [whole] body in water” (Lev 14:9; 15:13, 16) to all instances in which “bathing in water” was required (cf. Lev 14:8–9; 15:5–8, 10–11, 18, 21–22, 27). To facilitate obedience to the command so interpreted, pools with steps facilitating immersion (*miqva’ot*) were cut into bedrock throughout first-century Judea.⁹

This was the milieu in which John “the Immerser” issued his summons to all God’s covenant people to come to the flowing rivers of the Jordan and

⁷ This takes *tou Christou* in the phrase *en tē(i) peritomē(i) tou Christou* (“in the circumcision of the Messiah/Christ,” Col 2:11) as an “objective” genitive, referring to the spiritual circumcision performed on Christ in his death and resurrection and on Christians by their participation therein; this interpretation is supported by the statement closely following that “dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision (literally, ‘the foreskin’) of your flesh, [God] made you alive together with [Christ]” (Col 2:13). The alternative construction of the genitive in v. 12 as “subjective” would understand Christ as the agent of a spiritual operation which releases believers from the burden of the flesh. See further Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [1994]), 318–20.

⁸ For the understanding and practice of purification in ancient Judaism, see E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 214–30. For the ambiguous relationship between impurity and sin, see Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), esp. 214–27. On the “scores of immersion pools ... found in or around the temple mount” as part of the setting presupposed in Luke’s account of mass baptisms in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41), see Ferguson, *Baptism*, 170.

receive “a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).¹⁰ Immersion in the Jordan likely evoked the entry into the Land in the days of Israel’s infancy (Josh, chaps. 3–4) and suggested that God was fulfilling his promise of a new exodus and a restoration of his people’s inheritance, a theme notably developed in the book of Isaiah.¹¹ The promise that God would accompany and protect his people when they “pass through the waters ... and ... walk through fire” (Isa 43:2 NRSV) is especially pertinent to the description of John’s preaching (Matt 3:7–12; Luke 3:7–17).

John’s baptism differed from the ordinary washings devout Jews experienced as a one-time purification to prepare for the coming of “one mightier” than John, who would soon “immerse” Israel in the Holy Spirit and purifying fire (Matt 3:11–12; Luke 3:16–17). This likely alludes to the promise that God himself would return to the temple and, “like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap,” would purify its worship and judge his people (Mal 3:1–5 NRSV). Mark’s description of John’s washing as a “baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” implies what Matthew and Luke make explicit, that John’s washing was offered to cleanse the people of their sins that they might “bear fruits worthy of repentance” in anticipation of the coming fiery judgment of God (Luke 3:7–9; cf. Matt 3:7–10).¹² By water or by fire, Israel would be made pure for God.

The baptism of Jesus by John links John’s baptism with baptism “in the name of Jesus.” Everett Ferguson aptly concludes, “In receiving baptism Jesus identified with the people of Israel to whom John addressed his message

¹⁰ On John’s baptism, see Ferguson, *Baptism*, esp. 84–92. A river was especially appropriate as the site of John’s baptism in view of the use of running water for “the most severe cases of impurity” (Lev 14:5–6, 50–52; 15:13; Num 19:17; and Deut 21:4), as noted by Ferguson (95 n. 55).

¹¹ Mark L. Strauss cites as passages developing this theme Isa. 40:3–5; 41:17–20; 42:14–16; 43:1–3, 14–21; 48:20–21; 49:8–12; 51:9–10; 52:11–12; and 55:12–13 (*The Davidic Messiah in Luke–Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology*, JSNT Supp 413 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 285–86). As John and his contemporaries read the book of Isaiah as a unity—and indeed, the Scriptures in their entirety—one might also cite in this connection Isa 11:11–16; Jer 23:1–8; 31:1–14 (cf. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 189; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998], 15–18).

¹² Luke suggests that John was especially concerned with the use of possessions in ways that honored God and aided one’s neighbor (Luke 3:10–14).

and started on a path that led to the cross (Matt. 16:21–23). He also set an example of obedience for others.”¹³ Purification from sins, dedication to the holy God, and vindication in his coming judgment are motifs that baptism in the name of Jesus shared with John’s baptism. Thus, Paul reminds the Corinthians that in their baptism they were “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” (1 Cor 6:11). Converts to the gospel were cleansed of moral defilement, set apart from the world and dedicated to God as his special possession, and declared upright before God “in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”¹⁴

What most clearly distinguished John’s baptism from the baptism that Christians practiced was the invocation of the name of Jesus. The book of Acts characteristically depicts baptism as practiced “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” beginning with Peter’s invitation on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:28; cf. 8:12; 10:48; 19:5; cf. 22:16). Paul’s ironic question to his own enthusiasts in Corinth, “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:13) confirms that this was the baptismal practice in the Pauline mission. Luke and Paul also agree in understanding this practice of baptism in light of the prophecy of Joel that at the time when God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh (either in anticipation of or in conjunction with “the great and terrible day of the Lord”), “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 2:28–32). Luke quotes the entire prophetic passage in his report of Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:16–21), and Paul quotes its climactic verse at the conclusion of his argument from Scripture that the Law and the prophets attest the righteousness from God revealed through the trust of Christ (Rom 10:5–13; cf. 1:2; 3:21–22).

Paul’s discussion in Romans 10 likely shows us at least part of what was involved in the practice. Having heard “the word of faith that we proclaim”

¹³ Ferguson, *Baptism*, 102. For the difficulties raised for Jesus’ early followers by the narrative of his baptism by John, see Ferguson, 99–103; Hartman, “*Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*,” 21–27.

¹⁴ The recollection in 1 Cor 6:11 of the Corinthians’ conversion in terms of “justification” and the presupposition that they will recognize their experience recounted in those terms stands against the proposal that for Paul justification was a purely polemical doctrine, articulated only in controversy with Judaizing teachers (so, e.g., Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]).

(Rom 10:8) and come to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead, converts acclaimed Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9) and so were admitted to the fellowship of the saved (Rom 10:13). Paul's similar language in the recollection of baptism ("washed ... in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God," 1 Cor 6:11) suggests that the acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, often repeated in the worship of the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; 16:22–23; Phil 2:11), was initially made at one's baptism. Luke attests the same practice in his report that Ananias urged Saul to receive baptism and cleansing from his sins while "calling on [Jesus'] name" (Acts 22:16).

Lars Hartman has effectively questioned the proposal that the characterization of baptism as "in/into the name of the Lord Jesus" was derived from banking practice and depicted the baptized as transferred into Jesus' possession, on analogy with a sum of money transferred into a new owner's account. He suggests rather that the phrase expresses the more general understanding of the baptismal rite as deriving its significance from the presence of the Lord Jesus and the believers' interaction with him.¹⁵ This understanding of baptism "in the name of the Lord Jesus" is the context in which Paul's description of baptism as "into Christ [Jesus]" (Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3) is best understood, as an abbreviated and somewhat more specific formulation of the same general perspective.¹⁶ To acknowledge Jesus the crucified Messiah as "Lord" or "Master" (Greek *kyrios*) is to accept a new identity as his servant and to affirm that the shape and course of one's life now lay wholly within his power. Baptism thus brings its recipient into the sphere of Christ's lordship and to a new existence "in Christ," an expression Paul uses frequently to express the new quality of life granted to those who have been baptized (cf. Rom 6:11; Gal 3:28), "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:2; cf. 6:11). The imagery of being "clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:27; Eph 4:20–24; Col 3:9–11; cf. Rom 13:13–14) conveys much the same significance as that of being "immersed into Christ," the believers' identity in either case being "covered over" by Christ's, imagery also applied to shaping Christian morals.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Hartman, "Into the Name of the Lord Jesus," 37–50.

¹⁶ See Hartman, "Into the Name of the Lord Jesus," 43 and n. 31.

¹⁷ See Michael B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011 [1991]).

the deep waters” (Ps 69:14–15 NRSV). Perhaps especially suggestive in this connection is the opening of the prayer of Jonah (Jon 2:2–6):

I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.
 Then I said, “I am driven away from your sight;
 how shall I look again upon your holy temple?”
 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.
 (NRSV)

The psalm, which exhibits both a general fit with its narrative context and independence in details, pictures descent into death (“the belly of Sheol”) as being enveloped by the waters that surround the earth (“the deep”), from which God delivers the sufferer; this pattern fits the psalm to serve as an evocative statement of the experience of Jesus in his death and resurrection, which baptism re-enacts for believers (cf. Matt 12:40; Luke 11:30).¹⁹ The same general understanding of baptism may be observed in Jesus’ discussion with his disciples of “the baptism with which I am baptized,” which they will come to share (Mark 10:38–39).²⁰

It is only in virtue of the resurrection of Christ that believers can now call on Jesus as Lord and be introduced into the new reality defined by his sovereignty. As his death was the necessary precondition for his resurrection, so

¹⁹ On the composition of Jonah chap. 2 and its relation to the surrounding narrative, see, e.g., Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 128–29. Graydon F. Snyder, while finding in the Jonah story only the general theme of “deliverance” and neglecting its specific association with Jesus’ death and resurrection, observes that the story of Jonah accounts for 60 percent of all subjects treated in early Christian art, and 72 percent of those derived from the OT (“Art and Architecture: Early Christian Art,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1.459).

²⁰ As Joel Marcus observes, Jesus speaks here “of being overwhelmed by the flood of death and of his disciples going down with him” (*Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 27A [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 752).

our eventual participation in Christ's resurrection (Rom 6:5), as well as our present participation in the "newness of life" that the risen Lord enables (Rom 6:4), require that we have first become partakers in Christ's death (Rom 6:3–4), "crucified together with [him]" (Rom 6:6). In Colossians, any reticence to speak of Christians as not only having died with Christ but also having been raised with him is cast aside, and Christians are described as both dying and rising with Christ (Col 2:11–13; 2:20; 3:1–3). As a result, Christians are called even now to "set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:2), even though the fullness of our new life in Christ will only become apparent when he is revealed (Col 3:4).

This association between baptism and resurrection reminds us that in addition to being seen as cleansing and as threatening, water is of course also vivifying; indeed, it is indispensable for life (as the ancients were more acutely aware than moderns, until there is an interruption in the flow of water to our homes). It is not surprising, then, that we also find baptism presented in terms of new creation (2 Cor 5:17, where baptism "into Christ" is implicit in the consideration of a person "in Christ") and new birth, or "birth from above" (John 3:3–5). This last image is an element of the rich baptismal symbolism of water as an agent of life in the Gospel according to John.²¹

As an enacted parable of the redemption that God has accomplished in Christ, baptism shows Christians how we have been purified by God for life in his presence and dedicated to his service. It dramatically exhibits for us the summons to share in the death of Christ to which we have responded and the new life God pours over us with the gift of his Spirit. If we seek to renew the life of the church, there is no better place to begin than to return to the baptismal waters in which we were made partakers of the grace of Christ and to drink deeply of what they teach.

²¹ Space precludes an adequate treatment here; see C. K. Barrett, *Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 82–84. Barrett makes the helpful observation (12) that the baptismal image of the "water of life" and the eucharistic image of the "bread of life" are complementary developments of the theme of "life" introduced in the Gospel's prologue (John 1:4). See also Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 175–206.

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